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The Funny Pages Found On-Line

By Wendy Pflug, Ohio State University

It seems that almost everyone has a fond memory of reading a newspaper's "funny pages" during childhood to see what their favorite characters would say or do next. Now, many of those newspaper strips can be viewed on-line. For many years, comic strips were considered childish and, at the very least, "low-art," but as popular culture studies departments developed at universities in the 1970s, cartoons and comic strips became the subject of serious scholarly inquiry. Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn describe this trend in their book *A History of the Comic Strip*, "Psychologists are analyzing them, sociologists are dissecting them, painters are trying to capture their spirit and indispensability.... A criticism that was for a long time narrow-minded is gradually awakening to the realization that the American comic strip is not an incoherent series of pictures, but the most authentic form of dreams, hopes, splendors, and miseries of our century."¹

The humble comic strip came about from the struggles of two publishing tycoons, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Pulitzer's *The World* is credited with creating the modern daily newspaper, featuring attention-grabbing headlines, sensational articles, and illustrations. In an effort to gain readers and boost circulation numbers, *The World* debuted the first illustrated color page in the Sunday supplement. To compete with *The World*, Hearst immediately purchased the struggling *Morning Journal*, which became the *New York Journal*.

Both men recognized the popularity of the Sunday supplement and worked to out-do the other. Pulitzer had two advantages: his publication, *The World*, had the highest newspaper circulation in Manhattan, and it published the nation's first comic supplement in color newsprint on May, 21, 1893."² Two years later in 1895, the supplement featured the single panel cartoon *Hogan's Alley*, which depicted the residents of a stereotypical inner-city slum.

The artist for this strip, Richard F. Outcault, created the first popular continuous comic strip character, Mickey Dugan, later known as the "Yellow Kid." Dugan was a buck-toothed, large-eared bald urchin, who always appeared in a yellow nightshirt; hence, his name. Outcault's cartoon was a success for *The World*, as many people bought the paper to see what mischief would happen next.

With the success of *Hogan's Alley*, Pulitzer hired more artists and began to feature more cartoons in the Sunday supplement. Capitalizing on Pulitzer's success, Hearst lured away these artists, including Outcault, to work for the *New York Journal*. Other popular strips such as *The Katzenjammer Kids*, *Buster Brown*, and *Mutt and Jeff* debuted.

Couperie and Horn note that as comic strips evolved, they came to embody what we think of as the essential elements of comic strips: "a narrative sequence of events, continuing characters from one sequence to the next, and the inclusion of dialogue in the picture."³ Originally, comic strips were essentially humorous, but a great variety of themes were soon developed: the fairy tale, suspense, mythological tales, and even science fiction.

With the importance of comic strips established, many repositories have made them a collecting priority. The visual nature of cartoon and comic collections lend themselves well to on-line resources, either in catalogs or as on-line exhibits, focusing on a single artist or title, or tracing the history of comic strips.

One of the challenges of collecting cartoons and comic strips is to create an accurate catalog description of the basic elements of the cartoon without leading interpretation. A database with thumbnail images to accompany a catalog record makes for a more effective search of cartoons and comic strips. Leading the way is the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division's Caroline and Erwin Swann Collection of Caricature and Cartoon, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/swa/>, which contains over 2,000 images, including cartoons, comic strips, and periodical illustrations in the form of drawings, prints, and paintings by American artists, spanning the years 1890 to 1970. Many of the contents of the Swann Collection are available through the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs On-line Catalog. One drawback is that due to copyright restrictions, only thumbnail images of some records will display to those searching outside the Library of Congress. The catalog is great for browsing and allows researchers to sort by collection, subjects, formats, creator, and related names. The catalog

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also offers a search tips section that gives pointers on what to do if there are too few or too many results.

The comic strip might have been perfected in America, but Europe has a long tradition of widely distributing caricature and “picture-stories” through publications. For this reason, it is noteworthy to mention the British Cartoon Archive at the University of Kent, which is dedicated to the history of cartooning in Britain. Researchers do not need to travel all the way to Canterbury to view the collections, however. The Web site <http://www.cartoons.ac.uk> is the largest on-line academic cartoon resource in the world, providing access to 150,000 digitized and cataloged images, plus background material, including two hundred cartoonists’ biographies. Researchers can search using typical metadata for artist, format, publication, title, or caption, as well as by the month, day, or year a cartoon was published. The site’s advanced search functions allow a user to search both by people depicted or people referenced in a cartoon. The database also shows items related to the cartoons, including the artist’s biography, other work, and correspondence (if such exists), and other cartoons that appeared on the same day.

Closer to home in the Midwest, the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at The Ohio State University contains 450,000 original cartoons from genres such as editorial cartoons, comic strips, magazine cartoons, and sports cartoons. The Museum Web site <http://cartoons.osu.edu/> contains two separate image databases. The Art Database <http://cartoons.osu.edu/art-database> contains item records of original art, many with images. One can find representations of many original art newspaper comic strips from *Little Nemo in Slumberland* to the World War II adventure strip *Steve Canyon*. There are also examples from more contemporary strips, such as *For Better or For Worse* and *Hi & Lois*. The Art Database allows users to narrow their results to records with images only. Researchers can search by keywords, title of strip, creator, date, and genre. The database also allows researchers to browse through a “click and search” function, which lets users limit their search by the name of their favorite artist or by collection. The other on-line resource is the Cartoon Image Database <https://cartoonimages.osu.edu/>, which contains images scanned from newspapers tear sheets or other printed sources. This database is searchable only by keyword.

Digital Exhibits

Colorful cartoons make great on-line exhibits and are one way to share comic strip collections. Several libraries have curated digital exhibits of comic strips. For a brief history of the American newspaper comic strip, the Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library has an on-line exhibit at <http://library.duke.edu/exhibits/earlycomicstrips/>, which traces the history of early comic strips from 1898 to 1916.

The Special Collections of the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries mounted an exhibit of the original art from the comic strip *Blondie*, found in the Don Ault Collection. A PDF from the exhibit *75 Years of Blondie, 1930–2005*, <http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/exhibits/Blondie.pdf>, gives a detailed history of this long-running strip.

The Swann Collection at the Library of Congress also has several exhibits and on-line presentations at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/swann-exhibits.html>. On-line exhibits specifically focused on comic strips include *Blondie Gets Married: Comic Strip Drawings* by Chip Young (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/blondie>), and *Cartoon Cornucopia: The Arthur J. Wood, Jr., Collection of Cartoon Art* (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/artwood>). The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum also features several digital albums. The “Lyonel Feininger Digital Album” contains artwork from Feininger’s comic strip *Kin-der-Kids*, http://cartoons.osu.edu/digital_albums/lyonelfeiningner/, while the “Selected Newspaper Cartoon Artists, 1898-1909, Digital Album” contains examples of comic strips, in addition to spot illustrations, story illustrations, and other artwork designed to accompany the written content of newspapers at http://cartoons.osu.edu/digital_albums/newspaperartists/. There is also a digital album devoted to that early classic, the Yellow Kid at http://cartoons.osu.edu/digital_albums/yellowkid/.

The resources listed in this article represent an innovative way to aid in the discovery and accessibility of cartoons and comic strips. Comic strips have long been a staple of childhood but are now also recognized as an art form and primary source for insight into the lives of everyday people and how society views itself.

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Society of American Archivists (SAA)

SAA continues to offer a variety of useful continuing education opportunities. Additional information can be found at <http://saa.archivists.org/Scripts/4Disapi.dll/4DCGI/events/ConferenceList.html?Action=GetEvents>.

Society of Georgia Archivists (SGA)

The SGA will hold its 2012 Annual Conference from November 8–9, 2012, on Saint Simon's Island, Georgia. The conference theme is "Brave New World: Next Steps in the Archives Profession." See <http://georgiaarchivists.blogspot.com/2012/02/sga-2012-call-for-submissions.html> for more information.

Society of Tennessee Archivists

The Society holds its annual meeting in Knoxville, Tennessee, from October 15–17. The theme of this year's meeting is "Red, White, Blue and Recorded: Collecting and Preserving Politics in Tennessee."

Southern Historical Association (SHA)

The SHA's annual meeting is scheduled for November 1–4, at the Renaissance Riverview Plaza Hotel, in Mobile, Alabama: <http://sha.uga.edu/meeting/index.htm>.

News From the Midwest

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Notes

1. Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip*, trans. Eileen B. Hennessy (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968): 115.
2. Bill Blackbeard, *R.F. Outcault's The Yellow Kid: A Centennial Celebration of the Kid Who Started the Comics* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995): 23.
3. Couperie and Horn, *A History*, 4.

Preservation Essentials

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Notes

1. Costs estimated by Herzog/Wheeler firm study. Patricia Ford, "Seminar Reference Workbook for Sustainable Preservation Practices for Managing Storage Environments," Version 1.2, Image Permanence Institute, November 2010, http://ipisustainability.org/pdfs/sustainability_workbook_minnesota.pdf.



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